



Service-Learning and the “Real World” of Classroom Politics: A College and High-School Composition Collaboration

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Although various critical pedagogies long insisted upon the classroom’s political dimensions, much related service-learning scholarship peculiarly insists that political engagement requires students step beyond classrooms to external settings where the “real world” of politics supposedly takes place. Building upon an increasing trend among service-learning scholars to examine ways such curricula affects internal classroom power dynamics, this paper recounts experiences of a college composition class in which students were given the authority to direct pedagogy and instruction of younger student writing partners. Though not conclusive, the research suggests that the older students exercised a more collegial, democratic teaching style with their younger peers than what they themselves experienced as students in their own traditional classroom settings.

I made an embarrassing error in the college composition course I taught this past Spring. It is a mistake I had also made in previous semesters and which revealed to my students that, at least in some small way, I judge them through racial, gender, and ethnic categories. I do not, of course, mean that I treat my students of one particular race as more or less talented than any other, or behave as though my female students have deficiencies or talents not found in my male students. What I am referring to is simply that when learning my students’ names, I sometimes confused those students of similar races, genders, and ethnicities. So, for example, I had two male Latino students, I will call them Sam and Rick, and for the first four weeks I could not get their names straight. I tried studying their student I.D. pictures and repeating their names correctly in class when I addressed them, but I kept making the same mistake. This produced awkward, uncomfortable silences between Sam and Rick and, when we all realized the racial, ethnic, and gender components of my error, between myself and the entire class.

Fortunately, something humorous soon broke the tension. I do not know if Sam and Rick conspired to do this, or if it just happened spontaneously, but they began purposefully switching names to see if they could confuse me. Then Elliot and Pete (also not their real names), two white students whom I had no trouble distinguishing, started playing the same game. Everybody thought this great and it diffused the awkward atmosphere in the classroom, at least enough for me to say very directly to the students how sorry I was that I had made the errors. I talked to Sam and Rick about this later and they said it did not really bother them that much and that I should not be too hard on myself. Now, it is sometimes difficult to discern if a student is just telling you what you want to hear, but that kind of behavior does not fit either Sam’s or Rick’s straightforward personalities. And, as I mentioned earlier, this is a problem I have had in past semesters, but never once have students mentioned it as a criticism on the anonymous teacher evaluations they complete at semester’s end. Those evaluations ask specifically about racial and gender tolerance in the classroom, and students have never indicated that they experienced anything other than a welcoming and safe environment.

Indeed, looking back on my mistakes I have to wonder whether the discomfort my class experienced was because my errors involved the difficult topics of racial, gender, and ethnic bias or, rather, because they created the kind of complicated social dynamic that always occurs whenever a teacher is clearly in the wrong, particularly in their interactions with their students. Teacher errors like this call for some type of open intervention, and the students know this. Part of them wants to bring public attention to the teacher’s mistake, but another part of them knows the risks of confronting the classroom’s dominant authority. Students are caught between their ethical desire to do the right thing and education’s hierarchical power structure. It is not a comfortable place to be.

I begin with this story because it reveals two interrelated aspects about power dynamics that exist within classroom spaces. First, the types of power that often structure and delimit our students’ broader social lives are not always the same types of power that structure and delimit our students’ classroom lives. This is not to say, for example, that when either Sam or Rick enters my composition course they stop experiencing the world through their identities as Latino men. But I would assert that the problematic power relations in my class have less to do with my position of power as a white man and more to do with my position of power in the curiously political and hierarchical space of the contemporary university classroom.

This also suggests the second point I want to make: our classrooms are thoroughly political environments, pervaded by power imbalances, alignments, and negotiations that affect large swaths of our student interactions. In a broad sense, this was Paolo Freire’s (2000) essential insight when he advocated critical pedagogy to counteract the hierarchical dynamics of “banking model” instruction. It is also a point that has long been recognized in the scholarship on college pedagogy. Along the same lines as Freire, David Bartholome (1997) noted that a primary challenge college writers face is frequently composing for an audience (the instructor) who is always assumed to have more authority than they (p. 598). It was a similar problem that

concerned scholars of expressivist pedagogy like Donald Murray (1997, p. 5) and Peter Elbow (2005, p. 494) who, although they had a very different take on instruction than Bartholome’s, also recognized the effect hierarchical classroom structures have on student learning. James Berlin (1997), who vigorously criticized the expressivist individualism advocated by Murray and Elbow, only criticized that pedagogy to advance what he considered a more fervently political embrace of composition instruction’s potential to upset conservative social structures (p. 680). So despite a wide range of pedagogical agendas, the classroom’s inescapably political dynamics have long been a commonly agreed upon concern.

It seems a bit peculiar, then, that since various pedagogies have so long recognized the ineluctably political structures *within* the classroom, related scholarship on service-learning has been so quick to insist that its great benefit is placing students in political exigencies that exist *beyond* the classroom. Often this dichotomy is advanced with the best of intentions, as in Derek Bok’s (1982) early efforts to have theretofore insular universities engage problems with broader social relevancy (p. 307), or in Ernest Boyer’s (1990) arguments “that, in addition to research, the work of the academy must relate to the world beyond the campus” (p. 75). Indeed much of the continued distinction between the “academic” and the “world beyond campus” is articulated with the hope that service-learning can mitigate that distinction. So we find service-learning researchers like Wade Dorman and Susann Fox Dorman (1997) emphasizing that service-learning “bridges the gap” between “real world” social problems and otherwise detached classroom environments (pp. 119-122). Similarly, Gay Brack and Leanna R. Hall (1997) describe service-learning giving students “opportunities to apply principles and theories from their own fields in the real world” (p. 144). With equal conviction, Paul Heilker (1997) suggests service-learning provides students with “real world” experiences in civic discourse. He argues, “In order for students to experience writing as social action we need to move the ‘where’ of writing instruction to some place outside the classroom” (p. 72). More recently, Marco Gemignani (2013) advocates service-learning’s propensity to combine “course content (e.g., theoretical and research literature) with direct actions and real-world relations” (p. 2). Similarly Campus Compact (2013), a leading service-learning consortium, describes service-learning bringing “community work into the curriculum, giving students real-world learning experiences that enhance their academic learning while providing a tangible benefit for the community” (para. 1).

I have qualms neither with the broadened “real-world” scope advocated by these writers nor with their attempts to bridge gaps between knowledge and practice, but I do question their unstated premise that relevant social and political exigencies are found first and foremost beyond the classroom. Indeed a number of scholars within the service-learning community have also begun to question that premise (Donahue, 2011, pp. 20-24; Sylvester, 2011, pp. 55-57; Porfilio and Hickman, 2011, p. x; Clark and Nugent 2011, p. 13), arguing that the classroom exists just as much in the “real world” of politics as does the world beyond campus. Certainly there is nothing wrong with students externing in non-academic professional settings, but it seems to me that for many of our students the most relevant political and social exigency is usually found within the classroom. Nor, as writers such as Foucault (1995, pp. 204-207) and

Freire (1970) long argued, are the hierarchies that structure classroom power arrangements in any way less socially significant than, say, those that structure economic, governmental, or scientific institutions. Why, then, the relatively pervasive insistence that service-learning’s political commitments require it to step beyond academia to an external world in which the “real” politics is supposedly taking place? Might not an equally real, political, and practical education occur making pedagogy the service and the curriculum?

To my mind, these seem essential questions to ask in any discussion of what democratic thinking means for service-learning curriculum, even for those curriculums that place students in environments far beyond the classroom. Indeed, as service-learning increasingly engages complicated, controversial social problems, their varied complexities increase the likelihood students may critique teachers’ sociological analyses and challenge their authority (Sylvester, 2011, pp. 55-56; Yep, 2011, pp. 114-115; Hernandez, 2011, p. 88). Alternatively, students uncomfortable contradicting the teacher’s arguments may retreat into feelings of frustrated disengagement (Brooks, 2011, p. 140; Guenther, 2011, pp. 62-63). Worse yet, teachers unprepared for such resistance run the risk of retreating themselves, either hiding behind claims that a student’s insufficiently critical social consciousness evidences insufficient “cognitive development,” or confusing the desire to “coax, cajole and convince” students into enlightened political awareness with genuinely critical pedagogy (Boesch, 2011, p. 121).

Yet student resistance need not ultimately prove problematic, a point David Donahue (2011) argues quite eloquently:

Conflict in the classroom is inevitable. In fact, given the rich, relevant, and provocative content of many college courses, it is noteworthy that classrooms are most often devoid of conflict. This lack of conflict might reflect a lack of continuity or a lack of interaction, conditions that ultimately mean a lack of learning. The job of instructors then is to think about how conflict--intentional or not--can serve continuity and interaction and, ultimately, learning. Especially in service-learning courses where multiple points of view are valued and the teacher does not have total control but shares it with community partners and students, diversity of ideas and conflicting opinions should be expected. As students engage in reflection on service, particularly as they examine issues related to causes of inequity and injustice or political solutions to social problems, conflict is not only inevitable, it can be a prime opportunity for learning. (p. 103)

To think democratically about the internal power dynamics of service-learning classrooms is not, therefore, a call to retreat from the extra-curricular milieus service-learning often provides, but, rather, to prepare teachers and students to better encounter the complexities of those social dynamics by simultaneously addressing parallel workings of authority, power, and controversy in the classroom. Put simply, we can only expect students to engage in democratic thinking about the broader social world if they have space to think democratically in the classroom.

A Collaboration between Two Composition Classrooms

My own efforts to foster that kind of democratic thinking take shape in a unit I teach in the English composition course mentioned above. The course introduces entering undergraduates to writing in the major academic discourses: the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. In the final humanities unit, I ask my students to help a group of primary or secondary school students revise and advance drafts composed by the younger students for their regular course requirements. Each student in my class partners with a younger pupil, and the two exchange drafts and advice that advances a single composition from prewriting notes, to rough drafts, to final compositions. Clearly indebted to service-learning pedagogy, this unit is equally influenced by research in collaborative learning, particularly Kenneth Bruffee’s (1997) early research with peer editing. Bruffee noted that such collaborative educational interactions more effectively activate social-constructionist learning dynamics and democratized traditional knowledge and power structures by displacing the teacher as the sole source of intellectual authority in the classroom (pp. 402, 408-409). In our service-learning partnership, the students depend upon one another to produce knowledge according to standards created and enforced within a community of learners, a process, Bruffee argues, that accords well with the knowledge production students engage in within the academy and beyond (p. 402).

In this curriculum, the deliverables for my students are three. A first response to a very early draft composed by their younger partner, written as an email describing the ways the draft both succeeds and struggles. The second is a similar analysis of a later draft, this time in the form of a webcast video with my students delivering their revision suggestions “face-to-face.” Finally, the undergraduates compose a reflective essay in which they consider how, if at all, working with their younger partners changed their appreciation of the composition process. In past semesters, my students have also composed writing assignments specifically designed to help their younger partner-students practice the writing skills with which they particularly struggled.

The students with whom we have partnered have ranged in age from 8 to 18, although the following evaluation specifically considers a collaboration this past Fall with Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors in a public high school English course. The evaluation generally examines my own and my students’ experiences (the university side of the collaboration), but I have also included feedback from our partner-teacher. These accounts give specific assessments of the curriculum’s effectiveness in accomplishing service-learning goals (increasing student engagement, fostering practical skills acquisition, and producing tangible benefits for our partner-students), while also offering some insight into whether the curriculum had a perceptible effect on our classroom’s power dynamics.

Assessing the Curriculum

My observations of the university students’ experiences come from three sources: 1) A series of class discussions we had when preparing students for their final reflective essay assignment; 2)

The editorial feedback they composed for their partner-students; and 3) A short, anonymous curriculum evaluation survey my students completed at the unit's conclusion. While not definitive, these tended to confirm that our collaboration empowered both my students and their younger partners, while simultaneously providing my students with the type of practical skills acquisition central to service-learning curriculums. There were also some significant incidents and exchanges between the students that offered deeper insight into just how power dynamics operated within our classroom and how this unit worked to restructure them.

For one, my students reported feeling more comfortable offering constructive feedback to their partner-students than when, during other points in the semester, they were asked to offer feedback to their peers within our own class. There were two reasons for this. Some students mentioned it was simply easier to be critical when the person to whom they responded was not in the same room, but others offered more complicated analyses. One student explained (and many others agreed) that when asked to provide criticism to classmates, he felt compelled to pretend he knew more about writing than the peer to whom his criticism was addressed. It made him feel uncomfortable presuming a kind of disciplinary authority over someone his own age in the same class. On the other hand, working with younger students allowed him to give criticism more naturally because there was no false presumption of superiority involved in sharing the advice, simply an acknowledgement that the difference in age and grade level brought along a commensurate difference in writing ability.

While I found this encouraging, it also suggested a potential quandary that had concerned me from the outset: in this attempt to undo traditional teacher/student power dynamics, might my students simply duplicate those same structures with their younger partners? Put another way, were we just moving the teacher's power one step downstream, transferring the power dynamic between my students and me to the exchange between my students and their younger partners?

I put that very question to my students (and, as I'll discuss later, to our partner-teacher) who responded that they did not believe such a “transfer” was occurring. What they suggested was that their position as older students, although not too far apart in age or experience, allowed them a collegiality greater than that permitted to teachers, but also a frankness more thorough than that assumed by same-age peers. “I think the age difference helps” one student explained, “because there's only two years between us and its not as formal as it would be with your teacher” (class discussion, September 18, 2013).

When I asked students to more succinctly define the kind of position they had with regard to their partners, they offered three closely related terms: mentor, advisor, and mediator. As one student described it, “We're almost like a mediator between the two [teacher and student] and [we are] kind of like the in-between, guiding and helping them [the younger partners] reach their goals” (class discussion, September 18, 2013). Another student commented, “No offense, but when teachers give feedback to students it sometimes comes off more negatively, and you feel like, ‘O my gosh! The teacher's judging my writing.’ But the way we're telling them its like,

‘Okay, they get me. They’re not that much older than me’” (class discussion, September 18, 2013).

That collegial, advisory relationship is apparent in much of the revision feedback my students provided. Take, for example, this excerpt from one of my student’s letters to her partner about his essay on Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). What I find impressive is the smoothness with which the older student moves from acknowledging her younger partner’s achievements to her own recommendations for revision.

Dear [-----],

Thanks for letting me read your essay about *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It was clear that you understood what you read and the underlying meaning of it. You did a good job of providing information about the story so that someone who has not read the book before (like me) can understand what you are writing about. You identified and discussed several important themes. You talked about the control of sex by the government, the lack of freedom in the new world, and the main character’s personal journey.

Each of these themes is important, and I think if you organize them in a logical manner, you will soon have a fantastic essay! Think about how you can connect these ideas together and create transition sentences that will help flow from paragraph to paragraph. Creating a topic sentence for each paragraph will help you with transitions. You may also want to think about writing a thesis statement that tells the reader exactly what point you want to make (it seems to me that you want to show how Offred’s journey had an impact on her and the themes of the novel).

The author offers her partner a fair appraisal of the essay’s struggles, but does so in a way that acknowledges its insights and asks only that they be composed more clearly. Her advice does not demand organization for organization’s sake, but rather points out how such organization will do justice to the writer’s ideas. Kind and encouraging, but without sacrificing any critical rigor, the older student legitimates her advice by referencing its appropriateness to the younger student’s specific rhetorical exigency. There are no invocations of absolutist compositional laws (like “*always* begin a paragraph with a topic sentence”); rather the older student tailors her advice to her partners needs, making compositional techniques practical tools instead of commanded requirements. This grounding of compositional advice in the particulars of her younger student’s work is precisely the kind of democratic thinking we would hope to see; it shows that the older student’s understanding of good writing develops not from some external authority but from the particular, local exigencies specific to her partner-student’s composition. What emerges is not so much one-sided authority as mutual understanding.

Another example shows similarly impressive traits. This letter was written by one of my students in response to his younger partner's essay on J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). It is worth citing in full:

Dear [-----],

Your essay on *The Catcher in the Rye* is certainly on its way to greatness. You have introduced a multitude of events from the novel and have delved into some of Holden's thoughts quite well. Your quotes certainly helped with this. I also appreciated how you threw in the part about the psychoanalyst at the end, almost as a twist for your reader to demonstrate the twist as it occurred to readers of the novel.

That you have so many events and details about the novel is certainly a plus, and if you can organize and clarify them a little better, your essay will reach new heights. You see, the paragraph in which you discussed Holden's specific journeys (the third paragraph) seems a little list-like and doesn't really delve into what each of these interactions meant to Holden, and how that relates to your argument in the essay. Even if you were forced to remove an event or two to make room for more explanation, that paragraph and your essay as a whole would certainly be improved. It also became apparent that you were torn between using the present and past tenses at times. For example, when you wrote about Holden flunking out of boarding school, you may benefit from using exclusively past tense, as he has already done the flunking. This homogeneity will help your paper be more cohesive.

I certainly hope that my feedback has helped your writing process and I can't wait to see your finished draft!

With warm regards and such,

[-----]

What I find so impressive about this writer's response is how he also grounds his advice in the specific goals his younger partner's composition attempts to accomplish. Calling the numerous details and events a "plus," the older student's suggestion to present these less "list like" aims to help the younger student build upon his own genuinely productive efforts. This approach frames an improved presentation of the evidence as a step that the younger partner's writing is itself calling for, again locating broader composition principles in the younger writer's own exigency. Similarly encouraging is the respondent's advice on consistent verb tense, which he suggests not because it is either "correct," "proper," or "the rule," but because it will specifically "help your paper be more cohesive." The advice still conveys the grammatical principle, but does so by explaining why the student needs it for his individual rhetorical purposes. In both cases, the advice emerges out of the specific exchange between the two students, with the older student forgoing the external authority of style manuals or grammar guides for a more democratic engagement with his partner's efforts.

I should admit that these two students exhibited above-average facility delivering feedback so constructively, but their efforts to combine criticism with empathy were in no ways exceptional. Indeed, in none of the exchanges did I ever find my students taking on the kind of hyper-critical persona of a teacher who, as another of my students put it, thinks their “job is to tell you how much you don’t know” (class discussion, September 16, 2013). What I did see consistently in the exchanges was that my students were taking ownership of important compositional techniques and equitably sharing these with their younger colleagues. Qualities such as thesis clarity, argument organization, paragraph structure, and sequential elaboration no longer sounded like rules forced upon my students by better informed authorities. Rather they were portrayed as useful techniques with particular utility in certain situations. Not only were my students giving thoughtful, constructive advice to their partners, they legitimized that advice by referencing their partner’s own needs.

Another set of encouraging comments also tended to confirm my hope that the unit increased my students’ sense of power and authority over the curriculum’s direction. Up until our reflective class discussions on the curriculum, I had insisted that students focus their editorial feedback on what I consider to be broad, holistic, revision advice, specifically addressing problems they saw with their partners’ supporting arguments, paragraph sequencing, and thesis clarity. I was generally of the opinion that these “argument-level” issues should be a peer-editor’s first concern, leaving “sentence-level,” mechanical problems with grammar, syntax, and spelling for later revisions. However during one of our class discussions, my students insisted that their younger partners needed just as much help with mechanics as they did with argument organization, and that, in many cases, mechanical problems were so prevalent that they overwhelmed their partners’ attempts to compose well-ordered essays. As one student put it, “There’s like sentences within sentences, with no comma,” and that her student’s lack of grammatical ability was preventing “flow of any kind” (class discussion, September 16, 2013). Another argued the same point, noting, “In order to convey their message they need to write effectively, just as far as elemental [sentence-level] things” (class discussion, September 16, 2013).

I have to admit that I was not entirely persuaded by these arguments to re-prioritize mechanics, although I did tell my students they could do so if they saw fit. What I found heartening, however, was the vociferousness with which some of my students argued the case for addressing grammar and spelling, advancing opinions about our curriculum that they knew ran counter to my own principles but derived their own authority by referencing their younger partners’ specific needs.

This sense, that my students were attaining a sense of control and ownership over the curriculum, was also supported by their responses to the curriculum evaluation. Over 60% reported that the assignments gave them more responsibilities than most of their other work at college, with only one student responding that it gave him fewer (Table 1). Explaining their responses, students suggested that partnering with other students to solve otherwise

“academic” problems in no way lessened the reality of their obligations. “In most college work, I have to be responsible for myself and myself only,” one student noted, “but working with the younger students has kept me on top of my work because I know that someone is relying on me to help” (survey, September 22, 2013). Another student went so far as to compare the reality of the responsibility with parenthood: “I have a kid to take care of [in this curriculum]. I didn’t plan on having that burden for another 10 years” (survey, September 22, 2013). I think the equation of peer feedback with child-rearing was intentionally humorous, but clearly this student felt his responsibilities were significantly real. A third student echoed that sentiment, writing, “When a kid is counting on you, it feels like much more responsibility than if a teacher requested something” (survey, September 22, 2013).

Table 1

Compared to your other work in college, did this unit give you significant responsibilities?

Sample Size: 19 Response Rate 89% (17)

Answer Choices	Frequency
This unit gave me FAR FEWER responsibilities	5.9% (1)
This unit gave me SOMEWHAT FEWER responsibilities	0.0% (0)
This unit gave me SIMILAR responsibilities	24.4% (5)
This unit gave me SOMEWHAT MORE responsibilities	41.2% (7)
This unit gave me FAR MORE responsibilities	23.5% (4)

The curriculum also appeared to successfully accomplish other conventional service-learning goals. In the student evaluations, over 80% reported that the unit was, at least, “probably” having them practice skills helpful in their future careers (Table 2). When asked to explain their responses, many students cited the challenge of providing feedback that was both sympathetic and critical. As one student put it, “I want to be a doctor, so this unit has helped me because it has showed me how to address issues in a nice way so that they can be corrected, but not taken harshly” (survey, September 22, 2013). “The practice of positive criticism allows us to respectfully give our advice and suggestions in a positive way,” agreed another student, “which is key in almost any career in which you will be cooperating with others” (survey, September 22, 2013).

Table 2

Has this writing unit let you practice skills that will be helpful in your future career?

Sample Size: 19 Response Rate 89% (17)

Answer Choices	Frequency
DEFINITELY NOT	0.0% (0)
PROBABLY NOT	0.0% (0)
NOT SURE	17.7% (3)
PROBABLY	64.7% (11)
DEFINITELY	17.7% (3)

Students also tended to find this service-learning curriculum more engaging than past writing assignments (Table 3).

Table 3

Were this unit's assignments generally more or less engaging than past writing assignments?

Sample Size: 19 Response Rate 89% (17)

Answer Choices	Frequency
MUCH LESS engaging	0.0% (0)
SOMEWHAT LESS engaging	5.8% (1)
SIMILARLY engaging	5.8% (1)
SOMEWHAT MORE engaging	64.7% (11)
MUCH MORE engaging	23.5% (4)

Smaller numbers believed their efforts provided tangible benefits to their partner-students, although here, too, the majority of students thought such benefits were at least probable (Table 4). Our partner-teacher was more certain about the benefits to her students, commenting emphatically, “They [her students] improved their writing!” (personal communication, September 26, 2013). She also repeated statements I received from previous partner-teachers, that simply the experience of working, communicating, and building relationships with college students was beneficial for her students, many of whom have had little prior contact with post-secondary students or graduates. She also reported that, although some of her students were initially nervous sharing their writing, the older students were very effective delivering constructive feedback, doing “a wonderful job breaking the ice and making my kids feel comfortable...” (personal communication, September 26, 2013).

Table 4

Do you think you helped the students with whom you worked?

Sample Size: 19 Response Rate 89%(17)

Answer Choices	Frequency
DEFINITELY NOT	0.0% (0)
PROBABLY NOT	11.8% (2)
NOT SURE	23.5% (4)
PROBABLY	58.8% (10)
DEFINITELY	5.8% (1)

Conclusions

I am hesitant to draw definitive conclusions from a curriculum involving fairly small numbers of students or one conducted over a such a relatively short period of time, yet I was heartened to find telling indications of its success. Principally, students began to speak about writing techniques less as abstract concepts or absolute rules imposed by a teacher’s authority and more as pragmatic tools that they could use to help their younger peers confront their own particular exigencies. That they took so much ownership of the curriculum was very encouraging, as was their increased willingness to question the teacher’s pedagogical commitments and argue for different approaches. Both tendencies indicate how a service-learning partnership based in classroom work offers students valuable opportunities to merge academic and political practice, with students confronting authority and forming alliances that ground their own intellectual development.

This research also suggested some significant follow-up questions and areas for further study. The first among these is a need to assess more adequately the curriculum’s impact on our partner-students. This paper has clearly focused on the university-side of the exchange, but an equally focused survey should be made of the partners’ side. I have had encouraging communications from past partner-teachers, and all have suggested the exchanges were beneficial, but this only calls for a more systematic and comprehensive evaluation. I am particularly curious to hear directly from more of our partner-students, specifically about how they perceive changes in their own classroom dynamics and whether they found the relationships with their older colleagues empowering. In past semesters, we have had informal discussions about these issues, often through inter-class video conferences, but more focused conversations with the younger students could offer more clarification. Similarly, I want to begin cataloging our partner-teachers’ reactions in a more comprehensive manner, creating a standard evaluation survey so we can track the curriculum’s progress more broadly.

Despite these unanswered questions, I find promising suggestions that service-learning can effectively reorganize the classroom’s internal power dynamics. This is certainly not to argue against the vast quantity of research demonstrating the success of service placements far beyond the classroom. No doubt many service-learning curricula also find ways to teach students that classroom hierarchies are of a piece with broader social structures, and that interventions in one can have impact on the other. There is no reason, however, that the success of these broader interventions should limit service-learning’s scope to placements beyond the classroom. That service-learning offers students a wide variety of placements is a great strength, but it need not ignore the productive political education that can take place within the classroom where students already struggle and learn in very real ways.

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